



TEAM 8 INVESTIGATES



## Troubled Waters

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The summer heat makes a trip to the water seem like a good plan, but maybe not. There have lately been a number of alarming stories about the water quality of Connecticut rivers, lakes and the sound. So we decided to ask the question how safe is Connecticut's water?

Investigator Paul Adrian reports.

*Want to know more about the water, and conditions in the waters near you?*

[Here's the water quality data.](#)

This is hard to believe now, but only three decades ago it was a common practice for industries to dump waste virtually untreated right into the water. Now that you know that, think about all the industries, landfills and sewage plants that line the banks of Connecticut rivers. No one can deny our state's waterways were once terribly polluted, but we wanted to find out what they're like today.

Sometimes the news is not encouraging.

- "A leaking oil tank is the source of contamination in a swimming pond."
- "State official are warning people who eat blue fish and striped bass to limit the amount they consume."
- "The state has accused a Waterbury chemical company of dumping toxic substances into area rivers violating environmental laws."

But perhaps scariest of all are reports that some rivers and swimming areas have high bacteria counts, which could make you sick. The state recently closed Torrington's Burr Pond.

"I wouldn't want my kids swimming in it."

Larry Tarducci grew up on the Quinnipiac River. He's bitter about the river's condition.

Larry Tarducci: "When I was a boy, from the age of 1 to 12, I swam in the river. I swallowed a lot of water. It was crystal clear. Now, I'd be afraid to step into the water."

So what is the actual condition of Connecticut's rivers? The Department of Environmental Protection produced [this map](#) of the state's waterways. Every river you see in green and red is substandard. The map identifies half of the state's rivers as having problems, but the DEP's top water expert says this news is better than it looks.



Bob Smith, DEP: "It looks much worse than it is. Those same rivers used to be on the map, but they were grossly polluted. Now, they are on the map and we need to fine-tune our pollution program to catch the last remaining residue of pollution."

For the past three decades regulators have targeted and cleaned up what is known as point-source pollution. That's pollution from specific known sites such as industry, landfills and sewage plants.

Why was that type of pollution targeted first? Because it was easy to identify. Typically, a pipe leading into the river. And it was relatively easy to fix through stringent regulations.

An old General Electric plant in Pittsfield, Massachusetts is a classic example of point-source pollution. The DEP says it is responsible for the PCB's which make fish dangerous to eat throughout the Housatonic River in Connecticut. Although GE does not actively pollute, old contamination still poisons the water. The DEP hopes cleaning two-miles of river sediment will one day make the fish safe to eat again.

Environmental agents say a sewage plant in Waterbury is another example of point-source pollution. It contaminates the Naugatuck River for 20 miles downstream. The plant is finally being replaced. But while the work is ongoing the sewage actually gets less treatment.

Smith: "It's probably 50 percent worse or 75 percent worse than it would have been with the old plant online. But there was no choice but to build a new plant on that site, and just live with less treatment for, in this case, a year-and-a-half."

Smith says the health of the Naugatuck will change dramatically within the next year. The government is replacing two sewage plants and destroying four dams, which will allow fish to swim upstream.

The biggest clean up project in Connecticut involves the Long Island Sound. Volunteers join the state in monitoring the sound's oxygen level. Low oxygen in the water occasionally leads to fish kills. The solution;

make sure every sewage plant in the state removes nitrogen from the waste. That project will take 15 years and cost between \$350-400 million dollars.

Steve Yergeau, Save the Sound: "It took a long time to pollute the sound. It's going to take a long time to clean it up."

Now that the state has a handle on point-source pollution, the DEP and environmental groups are beginning to target pollution that doesn't come from one specific place but from all of us. For example, when people over-fertilize lawns, a rain can wash the fertilizer into rivers, which ends up in the sound and contributes to the sound's low oxygen problem.

Urban sprawl means there's a lot of pavement in Connecticut. Storm runoff washes all types of pollutants into rivers. And even the overpopulation of wildlife contributes to high bacteria levels in lakes. The Canada Geese population has exploded. They no longer migrate because people feed them.

The DEP says cleaning up this type of pollution will take far longer and require more effort than regulating industry, but the reward someday is water that no one need fear.

We spoke about some of the major clean up projects in the state, but probably didn't mention the stream, river or lake right around the corner from your home. If you would like to learn about the health of just about any waterway in Connecticut and what's being done to get rid of its pollution, click on the link in the grey box at the top of the page. We've put the state's information on line.

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